

Gender, Partner Violence, and Perceived Family Functioning Among a Sample of Vietnam Veterans

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This study examined partner violence and perceived family functioning among a sample of 298 male veterans and their female partners. Partner violent men were higher than partner violent women on measures of partner violence severity, although differences did not reach statistical significance. Among couples experiencing unidirectional violence, female victims of partner violence reported significantly poorer family functioning than male victims of partner violence. Data appear to suggest that the effects of male-perpetrated partner violence on perceived family functioning may be larger than that of female-perpetrated partner violence.

Keywords: gender; partner violence; family functioning; veteran

There has been considerable debate regarding the relative frequency, severity, and impact of partner violence perpetrated by men versus women (Frieze, 2000). In a recent meta-analysis, Archer (2000) found women to be slightly more likely than men to commit partner violence, and women also engaged in a higher frequency of partner violence. Jordan and colleagues, (1992) obtained findings consistent with those of Archer in a study examining family problems of male veterans using data from the nationally representative National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS; Kulka et al., 1990). These researchers found that the female partners of male veterans were slightly more likely to commit acts of partner violence than the veterans. The primary focus of the Jordan and colleagues study, however, was not on gender differences in partner violence,

and therefore no direct statistical comparisons of male versus female perpetration of partner violence were conducted.

The Jordan and colleagues' (1992) findings were surprising in light of consistent evidence linking combat exposure and its sequelae with increased male veteran-perpetrated partner violence and abuse (Byrne & Riggs, 1996; Carroll, Rueger, Foy, & Donahoe, 1985; Glenn et al., 2002). It is difficult to ascertain whether elevated partner violence among the female partners of male veterans reflected self-defense (McNeely & Mann, 1990) or an assortative mating process whereby men and women at risk for violence perpetration became coupled (see Jordan et al.). Regardless, beyond the largely descriptive results presented by Jordan and colleagues, we have very little understanding of the correlates and potential consequences of partner violence perpetrated by the female partners of male veterans.

Many have argued that the severity and impact of male-to-female violence is greater than for female-to-male violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Bates, 1997; White, Smith, Koss, & Figueredo, 2000). There is now substantial data to indicate that men engage in more severe forms of partner violence than women, and women are more likely than men to suffer injuries and to seek medical attention as a result of partner violence than men (Archer, 2000; Cantos, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, & Thorn, 1995; Morse, 1995), though some have not found such differences (e.g., Capaldi & Owen, 2001). Fewer studies have compared men and women on variables reflecting the possible psychosocial effects of partner violence, and very little research among community samples documents the differential effects of partner violence on variables reflecting family functioning. Recently, Katz, Kuffel, and Coblenz (2002) found a negative association between male-perpetrated partner violence and female partner relationship satisfaction in two separate samples of undergraduates. Conversely, associations were not found between female-perpetrated partner violence and male partner relationship satisfaction.

We examined partner violence severity and perceived family functioning among a sample of male veterans and their female partners in an effort to generalize findings obtained from civilian samples suggesting gender differences on these variables. As with Jordan and colleagues (1992), we used data derived from the NVVRS (Kulka et al., 1990), but we revisited this data for the explicit purpose of conducting direct tests of differences between men and women on the variables of interest. Further, whereas Jordan and her colleagues found slightly higher prevalence rates of partner violence perpetrated by women, we predicted that male perpetrators of partner violence would engage in more severe partner violence reflecting greater likelihood of injury than female perpetrators. Another goal of this study was to examine the potential effects of male- versus female-perpetrated partner violence on perceived family functioning. We predicted that female victims of partner violence would report poorer family functioning than male victims. Finally, comparisons between violent and nonviolent couples were conducted to determine whether family functioning was lower among violent couples, and to help ensure that obtained gender differences in family functioning were related to the experience of violence (i.e., not due to gender differences in general).

METHOD

Data Source and Sample

Participants consisted of a subsample of Vietnam theater veterans interviewed for the Congressionally mandated NVVRS (Kulka et al., 1990). Data used in the current study were derived from the National Survey of the Vietnam Generation and the Family Interview

components of the NVVRS. For the national survey component, 5-hour interviews were conducted in the homes of Vietnam veterans who served in and around Vietnam sometime between August 5, 1964, and May 7, 1975. Among the 1,200 male veterans participating in the national survey, 376 were selected to participate in the family component, which consisted of 1-hour interviews with their relationship partners to obtain corroborative information regarding the veteran and to detail family-related information. Families of veterans scoring high on a measure of PTSD, with a high level of combat exposure, and/or a high degree of nonspecific distress were targeted for the family interview, as were families of veterans with none of these factors to ensure adequate dispersion or individual differences on the variables of interest. The family component response rate was 80%.

Eligible couples included those reporting partner violence within the past year, as indicated by endorsement of at least one physical assault item on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979), as well as couples with no lifetime history of violence. To preserve the distinctiveness of the comparison groups, 78 couples were excluded because they indicated no recent partner violence, but endorsed at least one incident of violence during their relationship. Of the 298 couples included in the final sample, 24 were male violent only, 25 were female violent only, 44 were mutually violent, and 205 were nonviolent. Male veterans consisted of 207 (70%) Whites, 75 (25%) African Americans, 10 (3%) Native Americans, 3 (1%) Asians, and 1 veteran classified himself as "other" with respect to ethnicity. Of these participants, 82 (28%) further identified themselves as Latino/Hispanic. Among female partners, 234 (79%) were White, 55 (19%) were African American, 6 (2%) were Native American, 2 (1%) were Asian, and 1 partner classified herself as "other" with respect to ethnicity. Twenty (22%) further identified themselves as Hispanic. The average age of the male veterans was 41.03 ($SD = 4.76$), and the average age of their female partners was 39.68 ($SD = 7.47$). Most (93%) of the participating couples were married, and the average relationship length among participating dyads was 13.6 years ($SD = 7.5$ years).

Measures

Partner violence was assessed in the NVVRS during the family component using female partner (nonveteran) reports on the 8-item physical assault subscale of the CTS (Straus, 1979). The CTS is a questionnaire used to assess the degree to which respondents use different tactics to resolve relationship conflicts. The measure has excellent psychometric properties (Arias & Beach, 1987; Straus, 1979; Straus & Gelles, 1990). During family component interviews, female participants rated the frequencies of partner violent behaviors for themselves and their male veteran partners over the previous year on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (more than 20 times) for each item. Two scores were computed to assess partner violence severity. For the first score, severity weights reflecting likelihood of injury (see Straus & Gelles for severity weights) were multiplied by each item score, and these weighted scores were summed. The other score consisted of the sum of the "severe violence" CTS item scores (kick, bite, hit with fist; beat up; threaten with knife or gun; use a knife or gun). Internal consistency reliability estimates for total CTS severity scores were .85 for female partners' ratings of the male veteran's violence and .81 for female partners' self-ratings of violence; for severe violence scores, internal consistencies were .80 for ratings of male veterans and .64 for female partners' self-ratings.

Perceived marital adjustment was assessed among both male veterans and their female partners using 15 self-report items selected from measures used in national studies of American life (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1991), the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), and the Marital Dissatisfaction Scale from

the Psychiatric Epidemiological Research Interview (Dohrenwend, 1982). Items tapped marital happiness, companionship, compatibility, and general satisfaction with the relationship. Score composites were calculated by summing standardized item scores. The internal consistency reliability estimate for this measure was .91 for male veterans and .92 for female partners in the family component.

Perceived family adaptability and cohesion were assessed using male veteran and female partner reports on the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES II; Olson, Bell, & Portner, 1978; Olson et al., 1983). The family adaptability measure (11 items) was operationalized as flexibility in family roles, responsibilities, and operating principles. The family cohesion scale (13 items) was operationalized as affiliation and closeness among family members. Items confounding partner violence with marital and family functioning were removed. For male veterans in the family component, the internal consistency reliability estimate for family adaptability scores was .80, and the internal consistency reliability estimate for family cohesion scores was .87. For female partners, the internal consistency reliability estimate for family adaptability scores was .83, and the internal consistency reliability estimate for family cohesion scores was .89.

Analyses

First, descriptive statistics for all study variables were computed across the comparison groups of interest. The primary analyses involved the examination of differences between male and female participants on measures of partner violence severity, and those reflecting family functioning. Among couples in which there was only one identified perpetrator of partner violence in the male-female dyad, one-way analysis of variance tests examined gender differences on each variable of interest. That is, differences between male- versus female-perpetrated violence were examined for severity weighted CTS scores and CTS severe violence subscale scores, as well as variables reflecting family functioning. Among couples in which both members of the dyad were identified as partner violent (bidirectional violence), paired sample *t* tests were computed to examine gender differences.

Other comparisons were made between violent and nonviolent couples on the family functioning measures. Those exposed to partner violence were compared to those in the nonviolent group on the family functioning variables using one-way analysis of variance tests. Specifically, women exposed to violence were contrasted with women in nonviolent relationships, and the same analyses were conducted for the male veteran participants. Paired sample *t* tests were used to compare men and women in nonviolent couples on the family functioning measures.

For all comparisons in this study, effect sizes in the form of bivariate Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated. Effect sizes were interpreted in terms of suggestions made by Cohen (1988) for small, medium, and large values.

RESULTS

Severity of Partner Violence

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the violence severity variables among couples experiencing male-only violence, female-only violence, and bidirectional violence. Examination of the means suggests that among couples experiencing unidirectional violence, and those experiencing bidirectional violence, male participants perpetrated more severe

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics for Violence Severity Variables

	Male-Only Violent Couples (<i>n</i> = 24)		Female-Only Violent Couples (<i>n</i> = 25)		Bidirectionally Violent Couples (<i>n</i> = 44)			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Men		Women	
Severity-weighted CTS scores	8.29	15.48	3.52	3.45	11.75	20.09	8.82	14.07
CTS severe violence subscale	0.88	2.21	0.44	0.92	1.36	3.42	1.02	2.15

Note. None of the violence severity contrasts were statistically significant.

violence than female participants. Contrary to hypotheses, an analysis of variance test contrasting the severity weighted CTS scores between male-only violent couples and female-only violent couples was not statistically significant, $F(1, 47) = 2.26$, ns , with an effect size ($r = .21$) in the small to medium range. A nonsignificant contrast was also obtained among couples experiencing bidirectional violence, $t(43) = -1.65$, ns , with a small to medium effect size ($r = .24$).

A similar pattern was found for the CTS severe violence subscale score. Male-only severe violence was not significantly higher than female-only severe violence, $F(1, 47) = .82$, ns , with a small effect size ($r = .13$) for this contrast. Among couples experiencing bidirectional violence, men and women did not significantly differ, $t(43) = 1.12$, ns , and the effect size for this comparison ($r = .17$) fell within the small to medium range. Examination of the endorsements of specific severe violence subscale items (i.e., positive endorsement of any occurrence of the abusive act) among all couples reporting either unidirectional or bidirectional violence indicates that other than the item *kick, bite, hit with fist* (men = 18.3%, women, 19.4%), endorsements were higher for men on each of these items: *beat up*, men = 7.5%, women, 4.3% (men 1.7 times higher); *threaten with knife or gun*, men = 9.7%, women = 6.5% (men 1.5 times higher); and *used a knife or gun*, men = 3.2%, women = 1.1% (men 2.9 times higher). There were no significant gender differences on these individual items.

Exploratory analyses compared couples experiencing unidirectional versus bidirectional violence on the violence severity variables. Mean scores on Table 1 suggest that for both men and women, violence severity was higher among bidirectionally violent couples. Analysis of variance tests comparing men and women separately across couples reporting unidirectional and bidirectional violence (e.g., women in female-only violent couples versus women in couples reporting bidirectional violence) were not statistically significant. For female participants, this contrast approached significance for the severity weighted CTS variable, $F(1, 67) = 3.41$, $p = .07$, and the effect size ($r = .22$) fell within the small to medium range. For this contrast among men, the effect size was .09.

Perceived Family Functioning

Descriptive statistics for the perceived family functioning variables of interest are displayed in Table 2. Consistent with hypotheses, female victims of partner violence reported significantly poorer marital adjustment than male victims of partner violence among couples experiencing unidirectional violence, $F(1, 47) = 8.88$, $p < .01$, and the effect size for this association ($r = .40$) fell within the medium to large range. Significant contrasts in the hypothesized direction were also found between female and male victims among couples experiencing unidirectional violence on measures of family adaptability, $F(1, 40) = 4.76$, $p < .05$, and family cohesion, $F(1, 41) = 7.97$, $p < .01$, and effect sizes for these contrasts were .33 and .40, respectively.

Smaller and nonsignificant differences on the marital and family functioning variables were found between genders among couples experiencing bidirectional violence [marital adjustment, $t(43) = 1.13$, ns ; family adaptability, $t(40) = .92$, ns ; family cohesion, $t(40) = .19$, ns], though examination of the means for marital adjustment and family adaptability suggests a trend consistent with the expectation that women would report lower scores. Effect sizes for these contrasts (marital adjustment, $r = .17$; family adaptability, $r = .14$) were in the small to medium range. The effect size for the family cohesion comparison was .03.

Exploratory analyses compared participants from couples experiencing unidirectional violence on the family functioning variables. As Table 2 suggests, nonviolent men who

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics for Family Functioning Variables

	Male-Only Violent Couples (<i>n</i> = 24)						Female-Only Violent Couples (<i>n</i> = 25)						Bidirectionally Violent Couples (<i>n</i> = 44)						Nonviolent Couples (<i>n</i> = 205)					
	Men			Women			Men			Women			Men			Women			Men			Women		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Marital adjustment*	2.56	8.85		-3.22 _{ad}	13.98		5.79 _{ae}	5.66		5.39 _d	7.76		1.83	6.35		0.52	9.40		-0.45 _e	11.19		-0.67	11.53	
Family adaptability	43.21	4.79		39.40 _b	7.25		43.61 _b	5.26		41.18 _b	8.33		42.23	6.69		40.94	7.09		40.76 _e	7.10		39.56	7.67	
Family cohesion	53.79	5.98		47.98 _b	10.79		55.08 _c	5.36		53.64	8.48		53.32	7.62		53.61	7.67		51.80	8.79		51.07	9.65	

Note. Groups with a common letter subscript significantly differed from one another in planned comparisons.

*Items comprising score composite were transformed to standard scores due to variations in response format; thus, total score mean approximates zero.

experienced violence from their female partners reported higher marital adjustment, family adaptability, and family cohesion than partner violent men without an abusive female partner. These contrasts were not statistically significant, though the effect size for marital adjustment was .22 (small to medium). Effect sizes for family adaptability ($r = .04$) and family cohesion ($r = .04$) were small. Conversely, violent women in relationships with nonviolent partners reported considerably better family functioning than nonviolent women with violent male partners. Analysis of variance tests revealed a statistically significant comparison for marital adjustment, $F(1, 47) = 7.19, p < .01, r = .36$ (medium), a nonsignificant contrast for family adaptability with a small effect size ($r = .12$), and a marginally significant comparison for family cohesion, $F(1, 39) = 3.53, p = .07, r = .29$ (medium).

Comparisons with Nonviolent Couples

Examination of Table 2 suggests that nonviolent women experiencing violence from their male veteran partners were lower on perceived family functioning than women in nonviolent couples. This contrast was statistically significant for marital adjustment, $F(1, 226) = 6.53, p < .05$, with an effect size of .17 (small to medium). Contrasts between these groups on family adaptability and family cohesion were not statistically significant, and effect sizes were small ($r = .07$ and $r = .08$, respectively). In contrast, men in nonviolent couples reported poorer perceived family functioning than nonviolent men in relationships with a violent female partner. This difference was statistically significant for marital adjustment, $F(1, 228) = 7.51, p < .01, r = .18$ (small to medium). Contrasts approached significance for family adaptability, $F(1, 227) = 3.62, p = .06$, and family cohesion, $F(1, 227) = 3.21, p = .08$, though effect sizes ($r = .13$ and $r = .12$, respectively) were small. Surprisingly, both men and women in nonviolent couples had lower scores on perceived family functioning variables than those experiencing bidirectional violence, though these differences were small and nonsignificant. Differences between the men and women in the nonviolent dyads were also small and nonsignificant.

DISCUSSION

Jordan and colleagues (1992) found female partners of male veterans to exhibit a slightly higher partner violence prevalence rate than their veteran partners, although no tests of these gender differences were conducted. In the current study, using data derived from the same NVVRS dataset, we found that partner violent men were higher on measures of violence severity than partner violent women, although these differences did not achieve statistical significance. Female victims of partner violence reported poorer family functioning than male victims in all contrasts. These differences were statistically significant among couples experiencing unidirectional violence, with effect sizes in the medium to large range. Among nonviolent dyads, men and women did not differ on perceived family functioning, suggesting that obtained differences on these variables among violent couples were not simply due to gender differences in general.

Taken together, findings appear to suggest that in the current sample of male veterans and their female partners, while partner violence between the genders may be roughly comparable, the effects of male-perpetrated violence may be larger than that of female-perpetrated violence, as has been suggested by several researchers (Holtzworth-Munroe et

al., 1997; White et al., 2000). Results from this study are also consistent with those of Katz and colleagues (2002). In two separate samples of undergraduates, these researchers demonstrated a stronger relationship between male-perpetrated partner violence and female partner relationship satisfaction than female-perpetrated partner violence and male partner relationship satisfaction.

Surprisingly, nonviolent men in relationships with a violent female partner were higher on marital adjustment than both men in nonviolent relationships and violent men in relationships with nonviolent female partners. The latter contrast did not reach statistical significance, though the effect size was in the low to medium range. These findings were not hypothesized, and are inconsistent with studies reporting male victims of partner violence to evidence poorer psychological adjustment than men not exposed to partner violence (e.g., Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992). Selection factors may help explain these findings. Nonviolent maritally dissatisfied men with adequate resources may have left their violent relationship, thereby inflating average levels of marital adjustment among those men who remained. Further investigation in this area is needed, as is research focusing on the physical and psychological impacts of relationship abuse on men (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001).

Results suggested higher violence severity among couples experiencing bidirectional violence relative to those experiencing unidirectional violence, as some dating violence researchers have reported (Billingham, 1987; Gray & Foshee, 1997). This may reflect a process whereby violence severity escalates in bidirectionally violent couples, consistent with social learning theories of mutual violence (Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, & Brohmer, 1987). Differences were particularly notable for women, although such differences were not hypothesized. Furthermore, due to measurement limitations inherent in the CTS, it is not possible to determine if violence within these dyads reflected attempts at self-defense. Further research is needed to clarify differences between these distinct patterns of abuse.

A limitation of this study was the relatively modest sample sizes of some of the comparison groups, which may have provided insufficient power to detect significant differences. However, a number of significant and potentially meaningful associations were found despite the threat of low power. Another limitation of this study involved our reliance on female partner reports of both her violence and the violence of her male partner. Although perpetrators of abuse tend to report slightly less abuse than do victims, evidence supports the use of a single reporter for abuse ratings in research, particularly in nonclinical community sample studies (Moffitt et al., 1997). However, to reduce potential response bias, future studies should obtain violence reports from both members of the dyad (Fals-Stewart, Birchler, & Kelley, 2003) in an equivalent manner, and include data from other collateral sources (e.g., police records, medical records). Similarly, collateral family reports for family functioning measures should be utilized. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of this study precludes our ability to draw firm causal conclusions regarding the impact of violence on family functioning. Prospective studies are needed to more fully understand these relationships among the current population of interest.

A final caution relates to the generalizability of study findings. Findings from representative studies may not generalize to clinical samples or those in shelter. Researchers have argued that community and shelter samples represent nonoverlapping groups, and those in community samples generally engage in less severe forms of partner violence that may not be captured in representative studies (Johnson, 1995; O'Leary, 2000). This may have led to smaller differences between violent and nonviolent couples in the current

study. Further, given our focus on Vietnam veterans, findings may not generalize to other civilian samples or veterans from other conflicts or eras.

Despite these caveats, our use of a nationally representative sample of Vietnam veterans represents a strength of this study. To date, we have very little understanding of the patterns and consequences of violence perpetration among veterans and their partners, though studies indicate a high rate of violence among these families (Jordan et al., 1992). Our results suggest that although the female partners of male veterans may be as likely as the veteran to perpetrate relationship violence, men's violence may have a stronger effect on victim's perceived family functioning. Future research is needed to examine the problem of relationship abuse among the families of military veterans, and to generalize current study findings to other veteran and military samples.

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